

## **The North Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal** by S. Robert Powell (Carbondale Historical Society and Museum)

The North Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal is mentioned often in discussions of anthracite coal in the nineteenth century. It is well to gather together in one place what we have learned about the North Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal.

This state-owned canal, built between 1828 and 1856, was 169 miles long, with 43 locks that raised the boats a total of 334 feet. (The southern end of the canal was 420 feet above the level of the sea; the northern end was 754 feet above sea level.) It ran along the North Branch of the Susquehanna River between southern New York (Elmira) and north-central Pennsylvania (Wilkes-Barre).

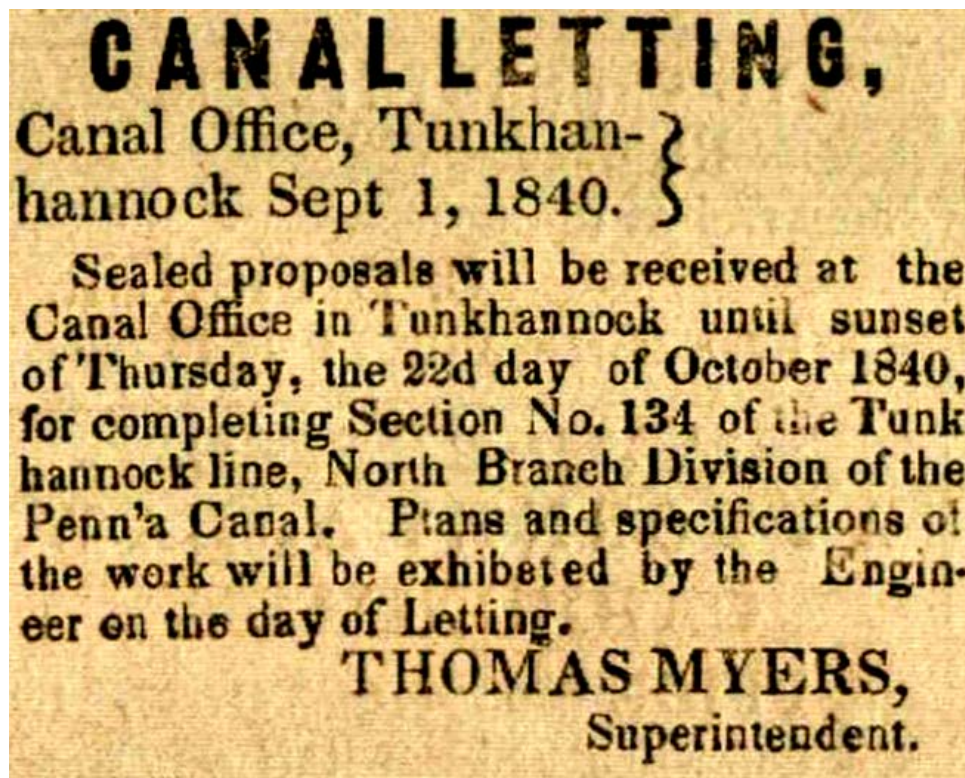
The first segment of the canal, begun in 1828 and completed in 1831 to Nanticoke Falls, was 55 miles long. In 1834, a project called the Wyoming Extension increased the canal's length by 17 miles past Wilkes-Barre to Pittston. A final extension of 97 miles from Pittston to the New York state line at Athens (Chemung River, near Athens, Bradford County) was started in 1836 and finished in 1856. In 1837, William Foster, Pennsylvania's Chief Engineer of Public Works, Canals, and Railroads, while supervising construction of the canal, lived in Towanda with his brother, Stephen, the celebrated American composer.

At its southern end, the canal connected with the West Branch Canal and the Susquehanna Division Canal at Northumberland (Susquehanna River), while on the north it connected with the Junction Canal (a privately built and owned canal between Athens, PA and Elmira, NY; partly opened in 1854; completed 1858; 18 miles long with 11 locks; closed in 1871; sometimes called the Arnot Canal, after John Arnot of Elmira, its principal stockholder) and the New York canal system. The Junction Canal connected the North Branch Canal with the Chemung Canal, which connected with Seneca Lake, which connected with the Erie Canal. Boats using the Pennsylvania canal system could thus travel as far as Buffalo and Lake Champlain.

### **Building the North Branch Canal:**

--Salmon Lathrop (born in Columbia County, NY, in 1781), the father of Charles E. Lathrop, president of the Carbondale Leader Publishing Company (biography of Charles E. Lathrop in *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lackawanna County Pennsylvania*, p. 181) was a railroad and canal contractor, who "in 1822 built three miles of the old Erie Canal in Herkimer County, N. Y., including the aqueduct across the Mohawk River at Little Falls. He came to Carbondale as an employe of the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company, to start their improvements here, at the same time taking possession of D&H "log tavern" that had previously been built by the company, to which he added a frame part. For two years he conducted their improvements, then erected a small building and embarked on the mercantile business. In 1838 he became a contractor on the North Branch Canal from Pittston to Towanda, which work occupied some years.

--The ad titled "Canal letting" that is given below is from *Northern Pennsylvanian*, September 30, 1840, p. 3:

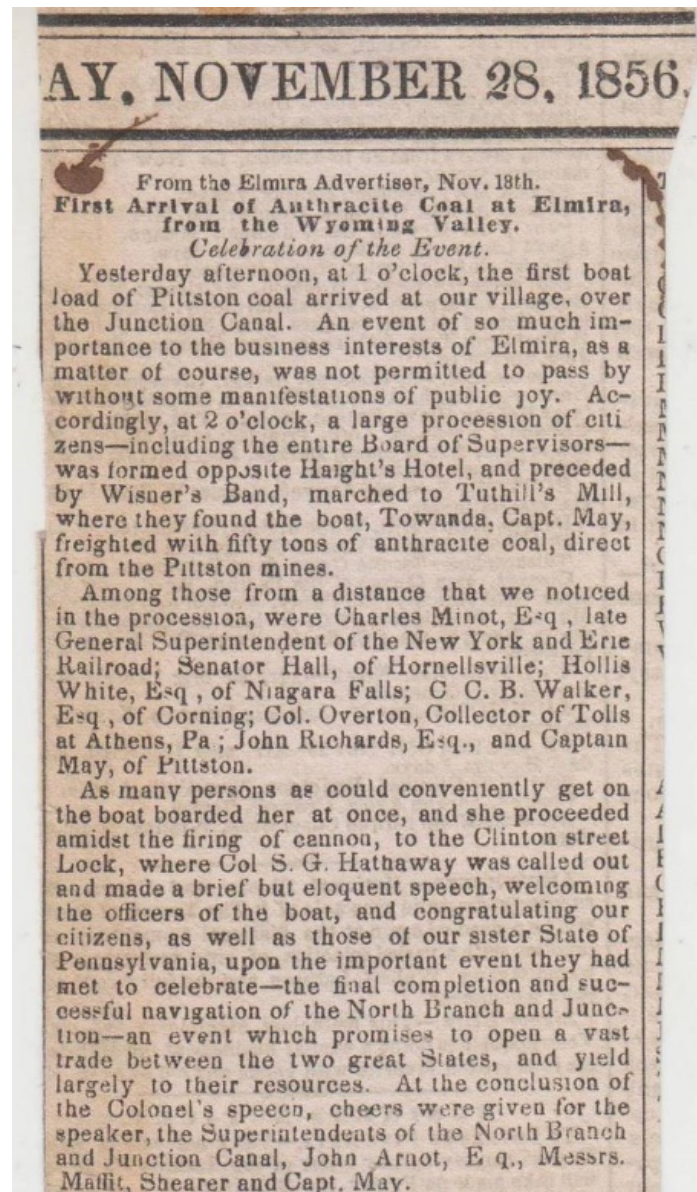


--**Bryce Ronald Blair**, working for his uncle, Frank Blair, was employed in the construction of the North Branch Canal at Tunkhannock in November 1852: He was born in Glasgow, Scotland on September 21, 1832, died in Carbondale, PA on February 11, 1916 (buried in Maplewood Cemetery). Upon his arrival in America in November, 1852, he went to work for his uncle, Frank Blair, and was employed in the construction of the North Branch Canal at Tunkhannock; in 1853 he was engaged on the junction canal, New York, as superintendent of sections 30 and 31. In December, 1868, he was appointed chief engineer of the Jefferson branch of the Erie Railway from Carbondale to Susquehanna. The road was built in 20 months at a cost of \$2,000,000. After 1880, he worked with E. E. Hendrick to look after his interests in the oil regions. He married Emma I. Tubbs, of Shickshinny. They had 9 sons and 2 daughters. Photo of Bryce Blair in *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania*, 1897, p. 234.

## The Junction Canal

The first boat load of Pittston coal arrived at Elmira over the Junction Canal in 1856.

The two newspaper clippings about the Junction Canal that are given below were donated to the Carbondale Historical Society on August 11, 2022 by David W. Maxey, Gladwyne, PA.





	Miles.
Schuykill Navigation to Reading,	64
Union Canal from Reading to Middletown,	77
Susquehanna Canal to Northumberland,	62
North Branch Extension to State Line,	162
Junction Canal to Elmira,	17
Chemung Canal to Seneca Lake,	23
Seneca Lake to Geneva,	45
From Geneva to Montezuma,	21
Erie Canal to Buffalo,	159
<b>Total,</b>	<b>630</b>

The total distance from New York city to Buffalo by the Hudson River and Erie Canal is 530 miles. This shows a difference of one hundred miles in favor of New York city, but it is something to have achieved a water communication with Buffalo, of which, up to the present time, we have been destitute. The distance between Philadelphia and Oswego by this chain of canals, is 541 miles. From Philadelphia to Rochester is about 520 miles. So that there is nothing to prevent the opening of a large and profitable trade in such articles as seek canal transit, between our city and the thriving lake ports of New York State. From Utica on the Erie canal to Binghamton, the Chenango Canal, 79 miles long, is in operation. From Binghamton to Athens, on the North Branch extension, a company is chartered to build a canal, which, when finished, will open new avenues to our markets.

NORTH BRANCH CANAL.—We give to-day, in another portion of our paper, an extract from an Elmira paper, chronicling the arrival at that place of the first canal boat laden with coal from the mines of Pennsylvania. The event has been already alluded to in our editorial columns, but its importance is deserving of more extended consideration. A new daily passing up the Elmira, so that the opening is merely a formal one, but has actually inaugurated in full force the trade so long looked forward to. It is not necessary for us to point out the admirable facilities thus afforded for the transportation of coal from the Wyoming coal field to the populous and thriving communities of western New York, for the active and enterprising men of the Wyoming coal region are fully alive to the importance of the connection. But there are some considerations affecting our own commerce with the interior, which we desire to present to our mercantile readers.

The Junction Canal, which carries the water connection across the northern boundary of the State into New York, and unites with the Chemung Canal, puts us in communication with Seneca Lake. This latter is a sheet of navigable water forty-five miles in length, running north to Geneva, where a canal, twenty-one miles long, unites it with the great Erie Canal at Montezuma. From thence we have opened to us an avenue west to Rochester and the trade of Lake Ontario, Buffalo, and the trade of Lake Erie and the whole West, and eastward by the way of Syracuse and the Oswego Canal to the flourishing port of Oswego on Lake Ontario, which is fast rivalling Buffalo in its competition for the trade of the West. The length of this route may be stated thus :



The boat then proceeded on to the Canal Basin, where Mr. Richards, of Pittston, was loudly called for, and responded in a few appropriate remarks. After which the procession again formed and returned to Haight's Hotel, and there dispersed.

The North Branch Canal was commenced in 1828, at Northumberland and completed as far as Nanticoke, a distance of fifty-six miles, in 1830. Sixteen miles more, extending from Nanticoke to the mouth of the Lackawana, were put under contract in 1830 and completed in 1834. Every foot of these sixteen miles is within the Wyoming coal basin, the greatest known anthracite coal field in the world. Prof. Silliman estimated its contents at twenty two thousand millions of tons. Other competent geologists, after extended and careful explorations, and making a deduction of one quarter for loss, place it at nine thousand and sixty millions of tons.

By the completion of the extension of the North Branch Canal from the mouth of the Lackawana to the State line, a distance of 94 miles, and of the Junction Canal from the State line to this place, a distance of 18 miles, the whole of this immense deposit is now brought into navigable communication with the entire net work of canals that traverse this State, thus ultimately offering the very best and the least expensive means of supplying the whole of western New York, and the west generally, with this valuable mineral. We say ultimately, because the advantages of this connection cannot be fully developed till the enlargement of the Chemung Canal is effected; a measure that should be urgently pressed upon the attention of the Legislature at its coming session.

At Towanda, thirty-three miles below this, the North Branch Canal receives the coal brought to it by a railroad sixteen miles in length, extending to the Barclay bituminous coal field, a deposit of not less than twenty millions of tons of bituminous coal, of great purity, and of unsurpassed excellence for the smithshop, and for the puddling furnace. These deposits must eventually furnish an immense tonnage for the Junction Canal, in the success of which all our citizens have a deep interest, and which owes its existence to the enterprise and public spirit of a few capitalists, prominent among whom is our respected townsman, Mr. Arnot, and Mr. Hollenbeck, of Wilksbarre, Pa.

The revolution that may be wrought in the course of trade, by the connection now effected, cannot, at this time, be fully appreciated. That it must be extensive and important is apparent when it is considered that Montezuma, by this connection, is brought by canal navigation, as near to Philadelphia as to New York; and that while, at this place, we are, by way of the Erie Canal, 444 miles from New York, we are, by the Junction, the North Branch and other Pennsylvania canals, but 360 miles from Philadelphia, the navigation of which will commence two weeks earlier and close two weeks later than will those of our own State.

The completion and opening of the Junction Canal was, not surprisingly, also reported in the *Carbondale Transcript & Lackawanna Journal*, November 28, 1856, p. 2:

**“PENNSYLVANIA AND NEW-YORK INTERNAL IMPROVEMENTS.** / Yesterday was an eventful day in our local, aye, our State history. The waters of the Chesapeake Bay and our great Lakes are united, and henceforth the internal commerce of our State [New York] with Pennsylvania, through the medium of the Junction Canal, will increase to an extent that will astonish our brethren along the line of the Erie Canal, who have so long opposed our connection with Pennsylvania. / The first boat through the North Branch, Pennsylvania and Junction Canals arrived here yesterday, and its arrival was greeted by our citizens with every demonstration of joy. The Tonawanda under the command of Capt. Abraham May, loaded with fifty-six tuns of Anthracite Coal, was safely moored in the Chemung Canal basin amid the cheers of many hundreds of our citizens, who had congregated for the purpose. / Yesterday morning information was brought to the village that the Tonawanda was on the way, and soon would be here. Before noon she reached Arnot’s Mills, about one mile east of us where she stopped. As soon as it could be brought about, a large body of citizens, preceded by Wisner’s Band, and Col. Terwillegar’s field piece, marched to the boat to bid her welcome. / As many as could get on board, when she started for her destination, [sic; portion of sentence missing] Arrived at the lock which reunites the waters of the Chemung with the Junction Canal, a brief, pertinent and eloquent speech was made by Col. Hathaway, welcoming the Pennsylvania Captain, boat and cargo, and congratulating this community on the consummation of this long looked for event, so important to the interests of our growing and enterprising village. / It is now more than twenty-five years since the commencement of the North Branch Canal. Difficulties have beset its progress during this whole period, until Gov. Bigler was placed in the executive chair. Appreciating the vast importance of a connection with the New-York canals, that dignitary consulted Mr. John Arnot and others of this State, who gave him a pledge that the Junction Canal should be completed within a given time. On receiving this assurance, the Governor took active measures to complete the North Branch Canal, and recommended to the Legislature and appropriation for that purpose. Through his vigorous perseverance the bill was passed, and the work was immediately recommenced, and is now finished. / The boat which has just arrived, and which has been greeted with so much enthusiasm, left the Pittston mines, Pa., on Tuesday last. She was delayed two days on her trip, and reached this place on Monday morning—occupying about four days time. Other boats are now on the way; and if the pleasant weather holds, a pretty good quantity of coal will reach here this Fall. This coal is of superior quality, and is considered the best in the State of Pennsylvania. / The Junction Canal, which unites the New-York Canals with those of Pennsylvania, is eighteen miles long, and was commenced in 1853. Its cost was \$400,000, one fourth of which was furnished by our enterprising citizen, John Arnot, esq., to whose energy, perseverance and means, more than any other cause our community and State are indebted for this link of improvement, by which we have a continuous boat navigation from the great Western lakes to Chesapeake Bay. All honor to the men who have achieved this important enterprise.” (*Carbondale Transcript & Lackawanna Journal*, November 28, 1856, p. 2)

**North Branch Canal News, 1858, as reported in the *Pittston Gazette*.” (*Carbondale Advance*, July 24, 1858, p. 2)**

**“Opening of the N. Branch Canal.** / This enterprise has so long been on the *eve* of completion that we feared morning would never come; but it has come, bright and auspicious. / The sale of the canal was the only thing that could save it, and now that it has passed into the hands of a new company, the names at the head of affairs inspire the utmost confidence of success: for the energy and vigor with which they have prosecuted the work, the company deserve the greatest credit; they have had great hindrances, and been at great additional expense, but to-day we rejoice in the consummation of the enterprise. / Last week the water was let into the North Branch Canal, at the Horse Race Dam, and Saturday reached Pittston, and the President of the Company announces plenty of water thro’ from Elmira to Pittston; if no brakes occur from unforeseen causes, the Coal dealers in this region may rely on this avenue of transportation to an inviting market northward, during the rest of the season. / From this advertisement we learn that they have fixed their tolls at *thirty-five cents* per ton of 2,000 pounds, from Pittston to State Line [94 miles], against fifty-six cents, the charge last year: this evinces a most commendable disposition to liberality. / Since the above was in type we learn that a fleet consisting of twenty-seven New York Boats, have arrived in the canal near here. We have not ascertained particulars, but the fact points to a new era in the history of the North Branch.—*Pittston Gazette*.” (*Advance*, July 24, 1858, p. 2)

**Change of name for the North Branch Canal Company:**

“The North Branch Canal Company has been authorized to change its name to the Pennsylvania and New York Canal and Railroad Company, and to construct a railroad along or upon the towing-path or berme bank of its canal. / The work of extending the Chenango Canal from Binghamton down the Susquehanna to the Pennsylvania line, there to intersect the aforesaid canal, is rapidly progressing.—*Honesdale Republic*.” (*Carbondale Advance*, October 7, 1865, p. 2)

**Portion of North Branch Canal sold to Lehigh Valley Railroad:**

The North Branch Canal from Northampton Street in Wilkes-Barre to the state line was sold to the North Branch Canal Company. This section of the canal was wrecked by the great spring flood of 1864. In 1867, the North Branch Canal Company then sold this section to the Lehigh Valley Railroad. The railroad laid tracks along portions of the canal towpath and operated both until 1872, when it was authorized by the state legislature to close the canal.

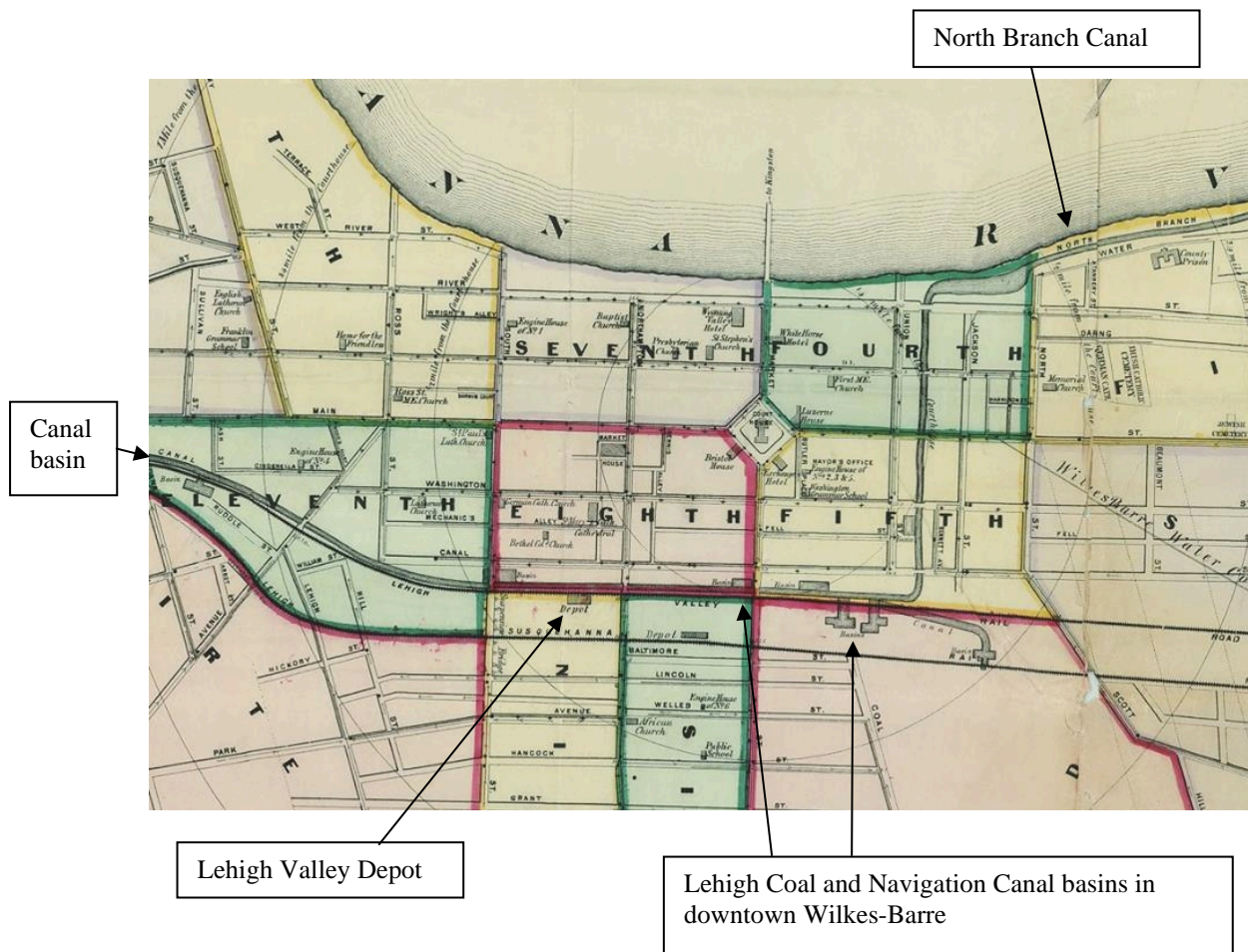
**D&H Wilkes-Barre Yard built on site of former Lehigh Coal and Navigation Canal Basin:**

The fact that the D&H Wilkes-Barre yard was built on the site of the former Lehigh Coal and Navigation canal basin is underlined by Seth V. Colvin in his biographical portrait ("They Had No Caboose") that is published in the October 1, 1932 issue (pp.259-260) of *The Delaware and Hudson Railroad Bulletin*. Therein we read: " 'Did you ever know that there used to be a canal terminal in what is now the heart of Wilkes-Barre?' asked Mr. Colvin, and then described the dam



across the Susquehanna River at Nanticoke, eight miles below Wilkes-Barre, the locks at 'Butch' Ball's landing which permitted the boats to pass from the river into the canal basin, located on the present site of our Wilkes-Barre yard. His crew delivered coal at the basin for emptying into canal boats en route to New York via the North Branch Canal." *Pittston Gazette.*" (*Advance*, July 24, 1858, p. 2)

The Lehigh Valley Depot is shown on the detail of the 1882 Wilkes-Barre map given below.



Also shown on this map are the North Branch Canal and the canal basin in downtown Wilkes-Barre. The D&H Wilkes-Barre yard was built on the site of the former Lehigh Coal and Navigation canal basin. There used to be a canal terminal in what is now the heart of Wilkes-Barre. There was a dam across the Susquehanna River at Nanticoke, eight miles below Wilkes-Barre, the locks at 'Butch' Ball's landing made it possible for boats to pass from the river into the canal basin, located on the site of the Wilkes-Barre D&H yard. D&H coal was delivered at the basin for emptying into canal boats en route to New York via the North Branch Canal.

**1882: Death of Alderman Waters** (one of the prominent actors in trying to get the North Branch Canal extended to Scranton):

**“Death of Alderman Waters.** / Lewis S. Waters, Alderman of the Ninth ward of this city [Scranton], passed peacefully away from the cares of life, at his residence on Adams avenue, yesterday afternoon at half past five o’clock, surrounded by the members of his family. He had been in failing health for the last year and a half, and about a week ago caught a severe cold which culminated in pneumonia and hastened his death. Deceased was in his seventy-fifth year, was regarded as one of the pioneers of the Lackawanna valley and enjoyed an extensive acquaintance throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania. He was born in Phoenixville, in this state, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1808, and in 1837 located in Mount Vernon, now known as Winton, in this county. Here he expended considerable money in the purchase of coal and timber lands, having secured four hundred acres of what has since become some of the best paying property in this section. It was his aim to transform the romantic village of Mount Vernon into a thriving industrial center, and at one time he employed a large number of workmen in the manufacture of lumber, which was shipped to Carbondale and Honesdale and rafted down the river to the Philadelphia market. He was among the first who mined coal in this valley, having opened two mines from which anthracite was sold at retail, and was one of the prominent actors in trying to get the North Branch Canal extended to Scranton. He was also the moving spirit in making the arrangement by which the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company permitted the shipment of coal on their canal to Hawley [emphasis added]. Out of this transaction grew the gravity road of the Pennsylvania Coal Company from Hawley to Pittston. He was also active in various other enterprises and did much to develop the section from which he had hopes of a flourishing future. An unlooked for circumstance, however, occurred in the failure of his Uncle Charles who was largely engaged in business in Philadelphia, and for whom he indorsed heavily. This swept away his property, but although it left him without means he was not entirely without hope, and by his untiring energy he secured a competence for his declining years. From Mount Vernon he removed to Archbald, where he resided at the breaking out of the war. He responded promptly to his country’s call and took two companies to Harrisburg, one enlisting in the Fifty-second and one in the Fifty-sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers. His health was not sufficiently robust for the rigors of the camp. And he was reluctantly compelled to return to Scranton, arriving here in 1865. The very next year the city was chartered and he was elected Alderman of the Ninth ward, a position which he filled ever since. He was a man of genial, refined tastes had hosts of friends among all classes, and was rarely gifted with the faculty of making all around him happy. His nature was frank and sunny, and to know him as to be his friend. At one time he knew every man living between Honesdale and Wilkes Barre, a distance of fifty miles, and it might be said with truth that he did not have an enemy in all that number. His home life was exceedingly happy, and he leaves behind him an interesting family. The funeral services will take place at his late residence Thursday afternoon at half-past two o’clock. Friends of the family are invited to attend. Interment will be private.—*Scranton Rep.*” (*Carbondale Advance*, September 2, 1882, p. 2)

See also the article on the North Branch Canal by the Columbia County Historical and Genealogical Society that is given here as a separate pdf file, titled “North Branch Canal article from Columbia County Historical and Genealogical Society.pdf”

